

## The Nuclear War that Almost Happened in 1983 (posted 9-5-03)

Scott Shane, writing in the *Baltimore Sun* (August 31, 2003):

Twenty years ago this fall, as the Orioles triumphed in the World Series, baby boomers flocked to The Big Chill and radios played Michael Jackson's Thriller, the superpowers drifted obliviously to the brink of nuclear war.

That is the disturbing conclusion of a number of historians who have studied the bellicose rhetoric and mutual incomprehension of the United States and the Soviet Union, which then had more than 20,000 nuclear warheads between them. With the possible exception of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, they say, the autumn of 1983 might have been the most dangerous moment in the history of the Cold War.

Ailing Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov, urged on by Soviet hard-liners and acutely aware that his country was losing the military technology race, had become increasingly worried that the Americans might be planning a nuclear first strike. President Ronald Reagan's rhetoric about the "evil empire" and U.S. military exercises poured fuel on Soviet war paranoia.

A series of mishaps and misunderstandings made conceivable a catastrophe that would have dwarfed today's worst fears of terrorists wielding weapons of mass destruction. That it did not happen is in part thanks to a KGB turncoat who alerted the West to Soviet fears and a Russian duty officer who did not panic when an archaic satellite reported that U.S. missiles were on the way.

"In retrospect, it was a pretty terrifying time," says Benjamin B. Fischer, a 30-year CIA veteran who now works on the agency's historical staff. "We're lucky it ended the way it did."

Fischer, who has published a seminal paper on the period through the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, says the danger resulted when wildly exaggerated fears of a U.S. surprise attack took hold in "the geriatric ward" of the aging Soviet leadership. But a contributing factor was the reluctance of Reagan and his advisers to believe that Russian fears were genuine, he says. aging

"We don't do Pearl Harbors. So we couldn't believe they really thought we were capable of a first strike," Fischer says. JFK/C-II?

John Prados, a Cold War historian and senior analyst at the National Security Archive in Washington, calls the fall of 1983 "a moment of high danger, in some respects more dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both sides were more heavily armed. Both sides were more hostile."

Yet, by comparison with the Cuban crisis, what historians call the "Soviet war scare" of 1983 remains little known.

"The Cuban Missile Crisis evolved in a very public manner," Prados says. "In 1983, the whole thing happened in secret."

Behind the tensions of 1983 was a program devised in 1981 by then-KGB chief Andropov called Operation RYAN, not a code name but a stark Russian acronym for "nuclear missile attack." Secret orders were issued to KGB officers around the world to look for signs, however subtle, that the United States might be preparing a pre-emptive strike.

KGB officer Oleg A. Gordievsky, who as a British agent later played a key role in the drama, watched RYAN unfold from KGB headquarters in Moscow and then as an intelligence officer posted to London. He saw a gulf between the views of worldly Soviet intelligence officers in the field and the paranoia of Kremlin leaders.

KGB!



WOW!

*Andropov!*  
"I never met anyone in the KGB who believed in the possibility of a first nuclear strike by the U.S.," Gordievsky says in an interview from his home in England. "Yet they all reported on the signs of such an attack because they were ordered to do it. They were afraid to say what they really thought."

By 1983, Soviet fears were growing, heightened by the imaginary evidence of a planned surprise attack reported by the Kremlin's cowed spies and by tough talk from Reagan.

In March, Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative, a futuristic missile-defense scheme many American scientists thought technically implausible. Soviet military leaders took the plan far more seriously, worrying that it might eventually make the Soviet nuclear arsenal useless.

That month, Reagan famously stepped up his anti-Soviet rhetoric. Speaking to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, he urged the Christian group in considering nuclear freeze proposals not to "label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil."

Meanwhile, NATO plans to deploy Pershing II nuclear missiles in West Germany were seen by the Soviet Union as shortening to a few minutes the warning they might have of a strike. From Moscow, the Pershing deployment created fears like those that shook Washington when U.S. spy planes discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba.

"The danger was in the Soviet leadership thinking, 'the Americans may attack, so we better attack first,'" says Oleg D. Kalugin, a former KGB chief of foreign counterintelligence, who lives outside Washington. While the KGB and military had institutional interests in exaggerating the risk of attack, Andropov's distrust of American leaders was profound, says Kalugin, who knew him well.

But American officials tended to interpret shrill protests from Andropov and his colleagues as empty propaganda. "The Reagan administration was committed to believing its own rhetoric - that SDI didn't threaten the Soviet Union and that the Pershings were not a first-strike weapon," Prados says.

Then came a series of potential sparks. On Sept. 1, 1983, a Soviet fighter shot down a South Korean airliner that had strayed into Soviet airspace, killing the 269 people aboard and prompting angry accusations from both sides.

Next, on Sept. 26, a Soviet satellite misinterpreted sunlight glinting off clouds above a U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile site in Montana as the launch of five ICBMs.

Lt. Col. Stanislav Petrov, the duty officer overseeing the warning system, kept his cool, reasoning that a U.S. first strike would involve hundreds of missiles, not just five. Instead of sounding the alarm, Petrov checked ground radar and other data, and decided that the satellite's alert was false.

Petrov's health was broken by the stress of the incident and its aftermath, and he soon retired from the military. When his actions that day were revealed by a Russian magazine in 1998, reporters found him infirm and surviving on a tiny pension outside Moscow.

Petrov's unsung heroism did not end the danger. A major U.S.-NATO military exercise called Able Archer was planned for November 1983. With emotions still running high on both sides, some Soviet officials feared that the exercise might be a cover for the long-feared nuclear attack.

But by then, Gordievsky had begun to feed to skeptical contacts in British intelligence documents from Operation RYAN showing that Soviet leaders' war fears were genuine.

i.e. Rupp - NATO is not attacking  
Hemel - Andropov really does fear  
(Were either believed?)

(Torture)

or SH/AQ

= removal of  
VMDs in Aug!

USAF Intel

or Gaps:  
FS!

SDI

or US

would  
believe?or  
Frage!

not, JFK (?)

K

and that R's  
advice would  
Jeez!

not be

taken

seriously!

(not vs

Casper

on Cuba?)

MAJOR  
INTEL

+ WIT

FAILURE

"There was incredulity at first. The British couldn't believe the Soviet leaders could think like this," recalls Gordievsky. "The Americans were even more disbelieving."

Nonetheless, in part because Gordievsky's warnings were being passed on by British intelligence, the United States scaled back Able Archer, which initially foresaw a role-playing part for Reagan. Tensions gradually eased, though the CIA's Fischer has found the war scare had a second phase in East Germany as late as 1985-1986. By then, Mikhail S. Gorbachev had come to power, quashed the first-strike fears and moved boldly to negotiate an end to the Cold War. nally?

Gordievsky, 64, escaped Russia in 1985 but was sentenced to death in absentia for treason, a penalty never canceled by post-Soviet Russian governments. He says he considers Reagan's defense buildup "brilliant" because it persuaded the Soviet leadership that they could no longer compete and sped the end of the Cold War. ? Ho

But the strategy was also extremely risky, he says.

"If the Soviet Union had overreacted, it could have gone very badly," he says, adding in a mild understatement "If war had come, Soviet missiles would have destroyed Britain entirely, at least half of Germany and France and America would have lost maybe 30 percent of its cities and infrastructure."

- See more at: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/1709#bombs9-5-03>